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Grand Jurors Said to Explore Wide U.S. Role in Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON, March 29 — A Federal grand jury exploring the Iran-contra affair has begun to reconstruct the complete history of American involvement with Nicaraguan rebel groups and is studying several key incidents, including the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1984, according to people with knowledge of the investigation.

They said the grand jury was particularly interested in the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in financing and arming the rebels, known as the contras.

The grand jury, they said, is questioning the agency's role in, among other things, the harbor mining and the preparation of a rebel manual that advocated political assassination.

These reports indicated that the grand jury's investigation was broader than previously known and would extend far beyond the specifics of the sale of American arms to Iran and the diversion of proceeds to the contras.

The special prosecutor in the case, Lawrence E. Walsh, has jurisdiction to prosecute crimes in connection with

the American supply network for the contras.

Those familiar with the investigation said the grand jury Mr. Walsh is directing is studying incidents in Nicaragua as far back as the regime of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whom the Sandinistas overthrew in 1979.

"Walsh is looking at more rather than less," one law-enforcement official said. "It means that his investigation could go for a long, long time, long after the Congressional committees have closed up shop."

Others familiar with the investigation said the effort to reconstruct contra history might merely be an educational tool for the grand jurors. They said the investigation of the harbor mining and the contra manual did not necessarily mean that those incidents involved criminality that could be prosecuted under Federal law.

'A Basic Education'

"The grand jurors have no expertise in Central American affairs," one Reagan Administration official said. "They need a basic education in the contra movement."

C.I.A. operatives directed the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in the spring of 1984 in an effort to scare away neutral shipping. Once the mining was exposed, Congress placed its first restrictions on aid to the contras. Investigators are known to be studying allegations that Administration officials and others conspired to violate the restrictions.

In October 1984, the C.I.A. conceded that it had provided the manual to the contras. Several C.I.A. officers were reprimanded.

As part of the grand jury inquiry, the head of the largest contra army, Adolfo Calero, has been called before the panel repeatedly, according to his lawyer, Joseph Portuondo of Miami.

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